Lafayette Historical Society

NEWSLETTER

P.O. Box 133, Lafayette, California 94549

President: William Wakeman (283-3908)
Editor: Shirley Thomson (284-2995)

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

First order of business for the new president is to express the Society's heartfelt thanks to Ollie Hamlin for a job well done as President. Thanks also to Bill Somerton for his inspiration and follow-through for the Sacramento Northern station markers on the Lafayette-Moraga Regional Parks Trail. And thanks to Bob Means who made the professional quality signs.

Now that we seem to have a good start for this year, let's not let the enthusiasm die. In other words, the Society needs help. That means help from others than the Board members. For instance, we now have 4"x5" photographic prints of all negatives on file, but they have to be matched with the negatives and information transferred to the new prints. The filing system for negatives, prints and Historical Society records must be revised, developed and initiated. *Irma* Somerton is in charge.

Audio recordings were overlooked at the Annual Meeting last May and the dedication ceremony on September 21. Fortunately, I have a rough copy of the dedication ceremony, but we missed Avon Wilson's remarks and those made by others. I would like a committee responsible for recording all future events of significance. We might reasonably record (video or audio) the walking tours on Sunday, October 20, if someone's available to handle it.

The Contra Costa County Historical Society is sponsoring a sculpture in Martinez and plaques in Lafayette and Orinda to commemorate the reported Pony Express ride or rides through Martinez, Lafayette, Orinda, and Oakland. We need someone to work with Ruth Dyer with research and in keeping the City Council apprised of our progress.

Best regards,

Bill Wakeman

William Wakeman

FALL EVENT : WALKING TOURS — SUNDAY, OCTOBER 20 — Details inside

APPLAUSE, APPLAUSE . . .

Special thanks to Dick Johnson for his superb handling of all arrangements for the potluck dinner on May 14. As usual, a terrific team of people willing to decorate, move furniture, tend bar, set tables, take care of warming and serving food, make coffee and serve desserts helped enormously. **Thank you all!**

We thank Mary Powell Flanders for her thoughtful letter regarding the Slocum excerpt contained in the LHS April newsletter. Substantive questions raised by readers of the old narrative reporting a local Indian sweat house event were clarified. Our thanks to Mrs. Flanders for caring and for writing and to her friend knowledgeable of history of the California Indian. >

PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVES RENOVATED

Under the direction of Archive Chair Irma Somerton, a substantial project to maintain and safeguard the Society's photographic collection was undertaken in the early summer. Fresh file prints were made of each of the six hundred photos on hand, the negatives stored in a new media security box, and a second set of prints was created for library files and lending.

The next step in the project is to number, index, cross-reference, and label the entire collection, making special efforts to identify some photos that are presently without identifying notes. >

MAY SPEAKER HONORED

Nilda Rego, speaker at the May Annual Meeting and writer for the Lesher newspapers, received an Individual Award of Merit in mid-June at the meeting of the Conference of California Historical Societies. Readers of her "Days Gone By" columns in the *Contra Costa Times* and her numerous historical articles in the *Sun*, aware, as they are, of her "significant contribution to the promotion and preservation of California history," will be pleased that her good efforts have been honored. >

1991-92 Officers and Committee Chairs

President	*Bill Wakeman*
Vice President	*Jop Van Overveen*
Treasurer	*Shirley Thomson*
Recording Secretary	*Ruth Dyer*
Corresponding Secretary	*Ollie Hamlin*
Annual Potluck Dinner	*Richard Johnson and Ollie Hamlin*
Archives	*Bill & Irma Somerton*
Book Sales	*Ruth Dyer*
Fire Engine	*George Wasson*
Hist. Displays	*Bill & Irma Somerton*
Landmarks	*Bob Means*
Membership	*Jack & Barbara Bailey*
Oral History	*Ray Peters, Marechal Duncan, and George Wasson*
Newsletter	*Shirley Thomson*
Program	*Jop Van Overveen*
Publicity	*Bill Somerton*
Walking Tours	*Collette Means*
(Without portfolio)	*George Ely*

DUES

Family Membership	*$10.00*
Student Membership	*$2.50*
Life Membership	*$100.00*
Business Membership	*$50.00*

NEXT BOARD MEETING

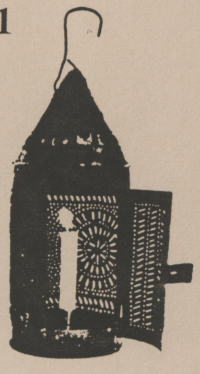
The next meeting of LHS Board members and committee chairs is scheduled for Tuesday, October 8, at the home of Shirley Thomson. Call her home or office (284-2995 or 284-1166) for directions. Members welcome. >

— L. H. S. FALL EVENT —

"ADULT" WALKING TOURS OF LAFAYETTE

Here's an opportunity to hear it from the horse's mouth, to take an illustrated history hike with a guide who not only knows the stories but remembers the details — President Bill Wakeman

Tours start at 1 P.M. and 3 P.M., Sunday, October 20, 1991
Starting point — Lafayette Elementary School



Refreshments to follow at Town Hall Green Room

RESERVATIONS A MUST
Call Program Chair Jop Van Overveen (283-3650, evenings), or President Bill Wakeman (283-3908, days) for information and reservations by Friday, October 18

A SUNDAY WALK THROUGH LAFAYETTE HISTORY

The event scheduled for October 20 comes in response to requests for an "adult" historical tour of Lafayette. That is not meant to imply that you must be 21 to tour with us; it's to make a distinction between the subjects and sites covered on this tour compared to the tour provided Lafayette's fourth-grade students. Of course it will be informative, but racy? . . . maybe piquant.

● Walking tour stops

Bill Wakeman, who has lived in Lafayette since he was born in 1921, will be our guide. He will cover the basics and a whole lot more, so this is your chance to hear the stories, visit the sites, and become acquainted with some of the semi-rural characters of earlier years.

Two tours are set — one at 1 p.m. and the other at 3 p.m. — and reservations will be limited in order to assure that everyone in each group can hear the guide and see the displays.

To join us for the Sunday walk, call Jop Van Overveen (283-3650, evenings) or Bill Wakeman (283-3908) by Friday, October 18, to place your name on the reservation list.

SACRAMENTO NORTHERN RAILROAD STATION SIGNS DEDICATED

An enthusiastic turnout of more than forty people met on the site of the former West Lafayette station of the Sacramento Northern Railway on Saturday, September 21, to dedicate signs marking the sites of the five former train stops in and near Lafayette.

In dappled shade on the Lafayette walking trail where it touches the east end of School Street, President Bill Wakeman spoke briefly of the role of trains in Lafayette's history. Bill's family was one of many that moved here in the years between the wars. The Wakemans came in 1918 to enjoy the advantages of living in a country community where people would be able to travel by train to and from work on the other side of the Berkeley hills.

A handful of people present for the event remembered riding the trains; Genevieve Flood Gallagher, for instance, rode the train to and from high school in Concord. She remembered the day described by Bill Wakeman when the train ran very late due to a power outage. The kids waiting at the train station—having reached consensus that its lateness was justification for a day off—hid among the orchard trees when they heard the tardy train coming. Archie, the brakeman, simply held the train while conductor "Knobby" Knobblock got off, rounded up the kids, and brought them on board for Concord and school.

Following the years of commuter trains (1913-1941), the freights remained at the service of local folks until 1957. Besides hauling fruits, hay and milk for farmers and dairymen, it was useful in filling in for transportation shortages in WWII. Even in 1947, when Herb and Alice Breckling built their lovely home above Moraga Road, the building materials and linoleum they ordered in Oakland were shipped to Lafayette station by train.

Wakeman thanked Taylor Farrington, Eagle Scout Candidate, who was responsible, along with four other Scouts of Troop 204, for clearing the sites, laying gravel walkways, and in setting the signs in concrete. City Council Member, Avon Wilson, commended the project and conveyed the city's thanks to the Society for it. The city's official proclamation of "Sacramento Northern Railroad Day" was read by immediate Past-President Ollie Hamlin.

Bill and Irma Somerton were thanked for researching and creating a special historical display of photographs and other memorabilia of the railroad era in Lafayette. Their display was set up at the dedication site. >

Editor's Note

All the talk and activity recently regarding the era of the railroads in Lafayette has had us thinking on those years, especially the 1930s and '40s. Another view of that period is presented here in some excerpts from the oral history record. A delightful program recorded in April 1977 gives us Mickey Meyers and Lou Borghesani looking back to their early years in Lafayette. The material quoted here is from Mickey Meyers. We will cover Lou Borghesani's remarks another time. (Please note that Editor's inserts are enclosed in brackets.) Charles "Mickey" Meyers died in 1989.

LAFAYETTE IN THE 1930s AND '40s

by Mickey Meyers

I'm not really an oldtimer or pioneer here. I came to Lafayette in 1936 from Visalia, California, where I was operating earthmoving equipment, building roads and highways and things of that nature, for the Union Paving Company.

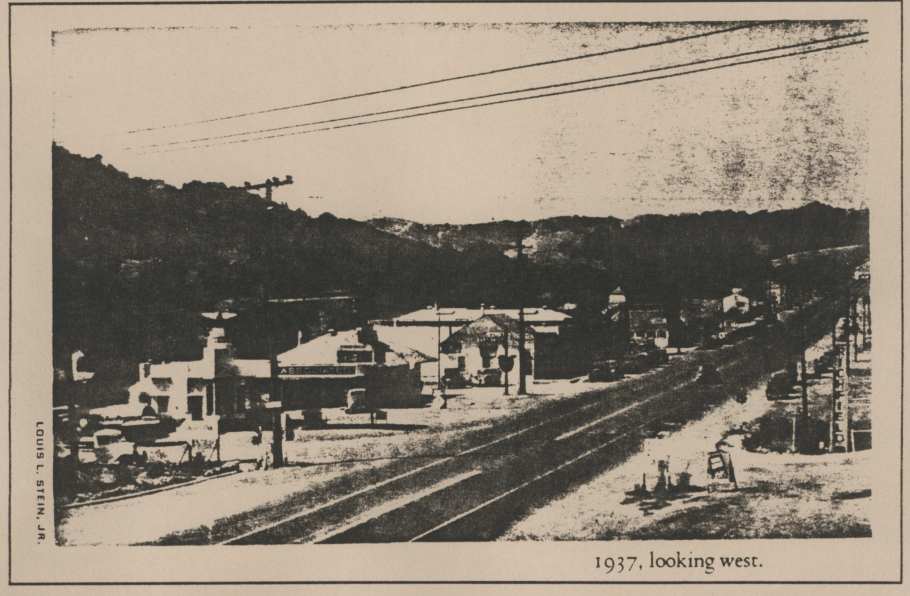
This was at the time when the bridge and the tunnel were being completed and they were upgrading all the roads going into the bridge. The Union Paving Company got the contract to do the stretch from Walnut Creek to Charles Hill, and I was the first carryall scraper on the job and I was to run up and down the right-of-way scraping the grass and mixing it with the dirt so it would decompose before they started cutting the hills down and building a road.

We took a big slice out of that hill between here and Walnut Creek – thought we did – but, boy, when they came along with this freeway they <u>really</u> took a slice out of it. At that time, if you were going through Lafayette toward Walnut Creek, you could only go as far as Moraga Road. You had to go down along Golden Gate Way because the road didn't go straight ahead. There was a hill there, with a little church on top (if you'll notice in your history book) and they had to demolish that church before we could build a road through there.

Now, I got a room with a fellow named Luther Chandler who operated a grocery store on the corner of Hough Avenue [Lafayette Circle] and, at that time, Tunnel Road [*Mt. Diablo Blvd.*] and I ate my meals in Lou Borghesani's Bar and Restaurant [The Roundup] there, and that's the first time I got to meet Lou. Well, this Chandler was Lou's stepfather-in-law, and being I had to room with him, he played a fiddle, I played a guitar and Babe (Lou's wife) played the piano, and our entertainment was to get together in the evenings and play and sing, and we had a helluva time.

That winter, we had completed the road, you might say, and were putting down the subgrade, and it must have rained thirty inches that year (some of which we could use <u>this</u> year). I couldn't work for about three months, so Luther Chandler said, "Why don't you come and work in the store with me, while you can't work on the road?" So, I thought, might as well. But when it came time to go back on the road again, he says, "Mickey, construction work's all right for a young guy, but," he said, "goddam, you're gettin' to the point you ought to settle down. Why don't you buy the grocery store?" I asked him, "How much you want for it?" He said, "A thousand dollars for the stock and fixtures." I barely had enough money to eat on in those days. Where was I going to get $1000? But the deal sounded pretty good, so I wrote back East and borrowed $1000 from my sister, and I went into the grocery business in Lafayette for a thousand dollars! In 1937. Lock, stock and barrel. . . .

I ran that grocery store and Bill Rupp ran the meat market there until Eleanor [Starks] graduated from high school when I talked her into coming to work for me. I paid her ten dollars a week, which wasn't bad. We got along pretty well, so I asked her to marry me, and in September of the next year we got married so I wouldn't have to pay her the ten bucks anymore. Eventually then, we tore out the partition where the barber shop and real estate offices were and had the whole store for a grocery store, and at that time it was a very modern grocery store. We put in all new fixtures and shelves and refrigerators. At that time frozen food was just coming in,



1937, looking west.

so we put in frozen food cabinets – and boy! – we were the best in town. We were selling hamburger for 19 cents a pound, coffee for 39 cents a pound, and bread at ten cents a loaf.

Mr. Starks built the building in the back of the store in 1945, and then I sold out the store to Mort Sparling who put a drugstore in there in 1949. Then in 1964, after Mr. and Mrs. Starks had passed away, we covered the creek back there and put the parking lot in.

The highlight of the year when I arrived was the annual Horse Show and Fiesta de Lafayette. Now, I got here in 1936, and I understand the horse show started in 1935. Lou tells me they had a Fiesta in '34, but the horse show started in '35. Anyhow, I got here in time to celebrate the second horse show.

At that time there were about three hundred horses here from Contra Costa County and other East Bay cities around, and it was a two-day program held in August that year at the Hamlin Ranch, out on the corner of St. Mary's Road and Moraga Road. It was kicked off by a parade, started out at the horse show grounds, went up Brook Street, across Dewing and paraded down Mt. Diablo, then went back to the horse show grounds.

This parade was really something to see. They had every kind of a wagon, buggy, stagecoach, floats, anything you can think of was in there, besides all the horses and beautiful silver saddles and bridles and costumes that they wore. It was really something to see.

I can still see the horsemen, though. On the east side of that arena was a little hill, and I can still see the horsemen bearing the flag, come up over that hill, down into the arena, it made an impressive ceremony out there.

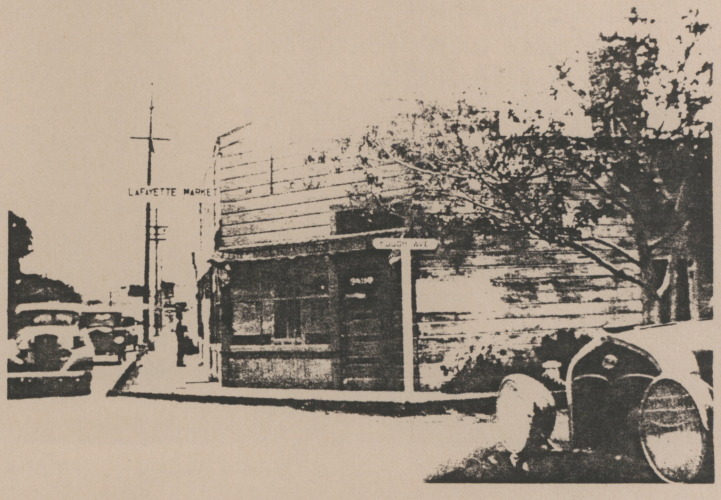
That year, I think, everybody in Lafayette joined in the festivities of that horse show, and it proved the ability of Lafayette to entertain with games and food and dancing, special events, all kinds of things down at the town hall and at the horse show grounds. They provided entertainment for young and old alike and presented the opportunity for good, clean fun where everybody could cut loose and enjoy themselves to the fullest.

As I understand it, the original idea of the Fiesta, was to raise money to improve the playground at Lafayette School. To give you some idea of the variety of entertainment they had at the horse show, in 1943 which was the last year they had it I believe (on account of the war), Lou and I were pretty prominent businessmen in town in those days, and they got us out there bulldogging calves in the arena. We didn't know anything about it, but they told us,"Now when the cowboy catches him, throw him down and tie his legs so he can't get up." Well, here they came, and Lou's roper caught his calf first, and he tied the legs up and stood up, and the calf stood up too, right away. I finally got mine down, got him tied up, so I won a big trophy for that.

In the '30s and '40s Lou's was the place to go. Lou's, at that time, was in the old red building that now sits in back of the Roundup, parallel to the creek and facing Hough Avenue [Lafayette Circle]. At that time it faced Mt. Diablo Blvd., right about where the parking lot is now. Lou's was the place to go in the evening – I'll tell you – any evening, or during the day, or any time, that place was crowded. It was a gathering place for everybody in Lafayette, I think. (There were slot machines!) But on Saturday night the place was crowded and on New Year's you might as well not try to get in the place. You might get in the door, but you'd never get up to the bar to get a drink! . . .

When I got here in 1936, I don't remember a concrete sidewalk in town. There were some wooden ones. Pioneer Market had one and Starks's had some wood and a porch-like think over Brown's, but no concrete sidewalks. I think the reason was that the road was just dirt. But when they came in and built the new road, then there were curbs and gutters, and they started building sidewalks at that time. Starting from the store (Starks's) at that time (1936) and going east, there was about a hundred feet of vacant property there, and the store was the only thing there. In fact, when Dad Starks said he was going to build a store up there, everyone said, "Why are you going to build a store clear out of town?"

Then there was nothing till you came to what used to be the little schoolhouse, a building that housed the telephone exchange, the post office *and the* library. Now, Amelia Schot was Postmistress at that time, and Marie Mischaut was the telephone operator. Catherine Shutt was also one of the operators; she took one of the shifts. Carrie Van Meter still hauled the mail from the station at that time, but I think she took care of the *library* too.



The Starks's Lafayette Meat Market (1936) on the southeast corner of Mt. Diablo Blvd. and Lafayette Circle, present site of Diablo Collection.

Moraga road (looking north) in 1935. The new Lafayette School is on the right.

Meyers: "Lafayette in the 1930s and '40s," continued

Then you came to Marie Bill's place and Manuel Lucas's service station there on the corner. Later he put in a better station, the Associated station. And that was all the buildings there were till you got down to the Pioneer Store.

Going west where Lou's place was, next to him Bert Mornini had a service station, and next to him Ed Morrison had a combination plumbing shop and fire house, and beyond that I think there was a drugstore. I don't know if Stanley had the drugstore and Winkler worked for him at that time, or if that came later. And that's all that was over there.

Now, on the north side of the street, of course there was the blacksmith's shop, Eleanor's uncle owned the blacksmith shop. We used to go down to his house, a big two-storey house back there in the trees.... Right next to that was little bitty shack, a hotdog and ice cream shack, then Carrie Van Meter's house.

They tore these houses down right about the time we got here, summer of '36, and those buildings across the road next to Oak Hill Road—there were about three of them—Clarence Brown had a hardware store and Heinie Hodapp had a barber shop and I think Garrett had a shop over there. This store where Clarence Brown had his hardware shop was the one he moved out of and Dad Starks moved all his stock and fixtures into and kept them there while he tore down the old store and built his new one. That was in 1935. By the fall of 1936, those buildings were all gone. They had to be demolished so as to widen Tunnel Road (Mt. Diablo Blvd.). So I can say that by Christmas of '36 there were no stores beyond Carrie Van Meter's house. And after you crossed Oak Hill Road, there was just houses, Thomson's, Hall's, Weldon's and a few others....

During the 1940s, the war years, St. Mary's had a preflight out there, and there were a lot of servicemen in the area. Lafayette became famous—or notorious—as the "Strip." It was called that on account of all the nightclubs we had. After you got by Upper Happy Valley road coming from Orinda, Knappenberger had the Red Mill, then you came into town and right where the road curved you had The Curve, so called because of the curve in the road, Cape Cod House now. Then you came down to where Lafayette Federal [San Francisco Federal] is, that was the Alsam. Then you came down to Gus Schwartz's Tunnel Inn; then down on the corner of Oak Hill Road and Mt. Diablo was the Rose Lee, later changed to El Molino and later again to Danny Van Allen's. >>

UPCOMING EVENTS OF INTEREST...

Oct. 5 &19 . . . . . FLL Book Sale, Lafayette Community Center, 500 St. Mary's Rd., 9-noon

Oct. 20 . . . . . LHS Walking Tours, central Lafayette, 1 and 3 p.m. (by reservation); call Jop Van Overveen (283-3650, eves.) or Bill Wakeman (283-3908)

Oct. 25-27 . . . . . California Council for the Promotion of History Annual Conference, 21250 Stevens Creek Blvd., Cupertino; contact Theresa Hanley (714-983-3198) for more information

Sacramento Northern Railroad — 1913 — Glenside Station, near junction of Glenside Road (north) and Lafayette-Moraga Trail

LAFAYETTE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
P.O. Box 133
Lafayette, California 94549

FIRST CLASS MAIL